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## Web 2.0 communication and stakeholder engagement strategies: how Romanian public organizations use Facebook

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### Abstract

Within the context of e-participation and involvement provided by social media tools, public organizations should provide a dialogic approach to their relationship with their publics. Having more touchstones with their publics and less control over their message, public organizations should improve their strategies of communicating with citizens. Through a content analysis of three Romanian public organizations' activity on Facebook, this study will examine how this social networking site is used to inform, connect, involve, mobilize and interact with Romanian citizens. The results highlighted that mobilizing, informing and interacting were the most used strategies and that Romanian citizens' involvement implied mere actions of liking, sharing and commenting the visual and verbal posts.

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### 1. Introduction

The internet-based technological developments made public and private organizations become organizations 2.0 whose main principles are (Tapscott, Williams, 2010): openness, collaboration, sharing, and global action. Within the context of digitalization and stakeholders' digital identities, the rules of interaction between organizations and their publics have changed from an asymmetric communication to a dialogic network of communication (Kent, Taylor, 2002). Public organizations have gradually become aware of the benefits that social media tools may have

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on their communication with their stakeholders. Besides the visibility and transparency of their actions, public organizations using web 2.0 strategies shape the new public space by providing another forum for deliberation, enhancing discussion, and promoting a democratic exchange of ideas and opinion. The focus, online communication in Romania, it is mainly determined by the growing number of Internet users in Romania (44.1% of the entire population, out of which 55.74% had a Facebook account in December 2012, <http://www.internetworldstats.com>). This increase made Romanian public organizations change from a web 1.0 communication to a web 2.0 communication. According to the monitoring service for Facebook pages in Romania ([www.facebrands.ro](http://www.facebrands.ro)), only 12 Romanian public organizations are registered on FaceBrands.ro in 2013, compared to banking organizations (n=114) or non-profit organizations (n=416).

## 2. Facebook – a means of connecting with citizens

The first five most important social media tools implemented in organizations in 2013 (Zerfass et al., 2013, p. 33) were online communities (social networks, 51.8%), online videos (46.1%), microblogs (e.g. Twitter, 41.5%), photo sharing (36.9%), and mobile applications (28.9%). Social networks are the most salient social media tool used by organizations because they “construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (...) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (...) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (Boyd, Ellison, 2008, p.211).

Starting from the literature on the strategies used for election campaigns (Gibson, Ward, 2000; Foot, Schneider, 2006; Lilleker et al., 2011) and on the use of social networks in organizational communication (Waters et al., 2009), we will develop a framework of online strategies that may be used by public or private organizations in improving the online communication with their stakeholders. The strategies to be analysed will refer to five main functions: to inform, to connect, to engage/participate, to mobilize and to interact. *The strategy of informing* refers to the information posted by the organizations in order to make their activities visible and to provide useful content to stakeholders/citizens. *The strategy of connecting* allows the creation of “bridges of digital communication” (Foot, Schneider, 2006, p. 104) between organizations and stakeholders, other organizations and online community members. *The strategy of engaging/participation* allows online visitors to become active participants (Foot, Schneider 2006, p. 70). *The strategy of mobilizing* is used to persuade online users to promote the organizations’ actions either in the online or offline environment by sharing content, taking part in online contests, to like a post or a comment etc. *The strategy of interacting* highlights the shift from one-way communication to bilateral symmetric communication through stakeholders’ comments, debates on forums, or interactive games.

Given the literature on the online strategies used by organizations to maintain reciprocal beneficial relationships with their stakeholders, our study will focus on the following research questions:

RQ1: What is the salience of online strategies used by Romanian public organizations on their Facebook pages?

RQ2: Which are the most frequent online strategy items used by Romanian public organizations in their engagement relationship with Romanian citizens?

## 3. Methodology

Through a content analysis of the three most appreciated Romanian public organization profiles on Facebook (<http://www.facebrands.ro>), this study examined how Facebook was used to inform, connect, involve, mobilize, and interact with Romanian citizens. The comparative analysis focused on the Facebook activity of the European Parliament Information Office in Romania (EPIOR – Facebook account since February 2011), the Ministry of National Defense in Romania (MNDR – Facebook account since July 2012) and the Government of Romania (GR – Facebook account since February 2013).

For our study we chose the time interval from April 30 to May 31, 2013, because it included several important dates (Labor Day – May 1, Easter Day – May 5, or Europe Day – May 9), which might have turned into opportunities to mobilize and engage Romanian citizens to get involved in online and offline activities. The sample of our analysis included a total of 242 posts: n= 53 (EPIOR), n= 168 (MNDR), and n= 21 (GR). As observed, the Ministry of National Defense in Romania was the most active in the online communication with Romanian citizens on Facebook. We coded all 242 posts of the three Romanian public organizations from April 30 to May 31, 2013.

Starting from the literature on the five online strategies mentioned above, we included, for each strategy, items expected to be present on the Facebook accounts of the three Romanian public organizations. The coding procedure included the quantification of each item present for each strategy. We coded the following items for each strategy: *the strategy of informing* (posted item description, photo posted, ad posted, video files, audio posted, press releases); *the strategy of connecting* (link to the organization's website, link to other organizations' website, link to other social media tools, tagging participants in posts); *the strategy of engaging/participation* (citizens' verbal posted item, citizens' photo posted item, citizens' video posted item, online polls, games, applications); *the strategy of mobilizing* (to like a posted item, to share a posted item, online contest, to create an event, calendar of events); *the strategy of interacting* (photo comment, video comment, posted item comment, to create a group, interactive games).

#### 4. Findings

The first research question focused on the salience of the online strategies used by the European Parliament Information Office in Romania (EPIOR), the Ministry of National Defense in Romania (MNDR) and the Government of Romania (GR) in their communication with Romanian citizens on Facebook. As shown in Table 1, all three public organizations mostly used the strategy of mobilizing (EPIOR – 85.7%, MNDR – 93.8%, GR – 77.5%). The high percentages for this strategy are due to the great number of likes and shares that Romanian citizens provided to the Facebook posts. EPIOR uses interaction as the second most salient strategy (6.9%) followed by informing (4.7%). MNDR used informing as its second most salient strategy, whereas GR used informing and interacting as its second most dominant strategy. The strategy of engaging was used only by the European Parliament Information Office in Romania.

Table 1. Frequency of online strategies – Romanian public organizations on Facebook

Public organizations	Strategy of informing (%)	Strategy of connecting (%)	Strategy of engaging (%)	Strategy of mobilizing (%)	Strategy of interacting (%)	Total (%)
<i>EPIOR</i>	4.7	2.1	0.4	85.7	6.9	100.0
<i>MNDR</i>	4.1	0.08	0.0	93.8	1.9	100.0
<i>GR</i>	10.2	1.9	0.0	77.5	10.2	100.0

The second research question sought to determine the most frequent items used for each online strategy. We included in Tables 2-6 only those items that were present on the Facebook pages of the three Romanian public organizations under analysis. As observed in Table 2, the three most frequent items used for the strategy of informing were: photo posted (n=755), posted item description (n=96), and video files (n=34). MNDR was the most active online public organization in informing the Romanian citizens about its activities (88.2%), followed by GR (8%) and EPIOR (3.8%). Posted item descriptions and photo posted were mostly used by MNDR and GR. Video files were the most salient item used by GR (55.9%) and MNDR (44.1%). A chi-square test was conducted to examine the difference between the ways in which the informing items were used by the three organizations, and significance was shown ( $p < .01$ ), with  $\chi^2 = 109.808$ .

Table 2. Items – strategy of informing

Items	EPIOR		MNDR		GR		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
posted item description	13	13.5	64	66.6	19	19.9	96	100.0
photo posted	21	2.7	702	92.9	32	4.4	755	100.0
video files	0.0	0.0	15	44.1	19	55.9	34	100.0
Total	34	3.8	781	88.2	70	8	885	100.0

As observed in Table 3, the items of connecting were used by all three organizations and they were statistically

significant ( $\chi^2 = 29.036$ ,  $p < .01$ ). MNDR included an equal distribution of the items of connecting: 8 links both to the Ministry website and 7 links to other external websites (e.g., online media websites). EPIOR posts had only external links to the European Parliament, whereas the GR posts had links only to the website of the Government of Romania.

Table 3. Items – strategy of connecting

Items	EPIOR		MNDR		GR		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
link to the organization's website	0.0	0.0	8	38.0	13	62.0	21	100.0
link to other organizations' website	14	66.6	7	33.4	0.0	0.0	21	100.0
link to other organizations' social media tools	1	50.0	1	50.0	0.0	0.0	2	100.0
Total	15	34	16	37.3	13	29.7	44	100.0

Applications were the only item is used to engage citizens and it used by the European Parliament Information Office in Romania ( $n=3$ ). The strategy of mobilizing included four items: liking, sharing, online contest and creation of an event. The high number of likes and shares for the MNDR posts made this organization (93.9%) the most active in mobilizing citizens. As Table 4 shows, liking and sharing are the most salient items used to involve citizens in the public organizations' online activities. The Ministry of National Defense in Romania (MNDR) was the only organization, which included an online contest and created four events to mobilize citizens.

Table 4. Items – strategy of mobilizing

Items	EPIOR		MNDR		GR		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
to like a posted item	507	3.1	15263	93.8	489	3.1	16259	100.0
to share a posted item	101	3.8	2516	94.6	40	1.6	2657	100.0
online contest	0.0	0.0	1	100.0	0.0	0.0	1	100.0
to create an event	0.0	0.0	4	100.0	0.0	0.0	4	100.0
Total	608	3.2	17784	93.9	529	2.9	18921	100.0

Commenting was the item through which the three Romanian public organizations interacted with their online friends (Table 5,  $p < .01$ ,  $\chi^2 = 200.073$ ). The MNDR posts received the highest percentage of comments (75.9%). Even if the Romanian government used video files as informing items, no comments were made, whereas the MNDR comments on videos prevail (100%). The most commented posted items belonged to MNDR (70.7%) and GR (17.8%).

Table 5. Items – strategy of interacting

Items	EPIOR		MNDR		GR		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
posted item	45	11.5	276	70.7	69	17.8	390	100.0
comment		5				8		
photo comment	4	10.8	32	86.5	1	2.7	37	100.0
video comment	0.0	0.0	68	100.0	0.0	0.0	68	100.0
Total	49	9.8	376	75.9	70	14.3	495	100.0

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

The content analysis of the Facebook posts made by three Romanian public organizations during one month (April 30 to May 31, 2013) revealed that mobilizing was the most salient strategy (92.9%), followed by informing (4.3%) and interacting (2.4%). Despite this salience, it should be highlighted that mobilizing was achieved mainly through citizens' actions of liking and sharing the public organizations' online content. The MNDR posts stirred the Romanian citizens' interest more than the EPIOR or GR posts. This online interest was maintained by permanent posts, which reminded of important days, such as Easter Day, Labor Day or announced future events, such as Children's Day (June 1). The Ministry of National Defense in Romania was the only organization which took advantage of other mobilizing options that this social network provides: online contests and events („Sunt mândru de părinții mei”/”I am proud of my parents” or „Fii tu eroul din poveste!”/”Be the hero in the story”).

Interaction with citizens was accomplished by allowing them to comment the posted items. The most commented items were the ones posted by the Ministry of National Defence in Romania. They included video files of the Romanian soldiers who were sending Easter wishes to their families. Commenting posted items, photos or videos was the only way in which Romanian citizens got involved in the public organizations' online activity. They did not engage in posting their own items on the Facebook pages. The dissemination of information was mainly achieved through posting photos and items. The photo albums and videos were created only by the public organizations; the citizens were not involved in uploading any visual or verbal post.

The results indicate that the likes of a public organization's Facebook page do not imply that the respective organization is the most active one in the online environment. The European Parliament Information Office in Romania (EPIOR) is the first public organization on the Facebookbrands.ro (14.974 likes in July 2013) whereas the Ministry of National Defence in Romania (MNDR) is the second (13.043 likes in July 2013). Unlike MNDR, which was the most active in informing, connecting, mobilizing, and interacting, EPIOR was the most active public organization only in the strategy of engaging by using three applications.

Despite several limitations, such as the temporal span of one month and the small number of public organizations, this study provides a framework that can be used for further analysis of organizations' Facebook posts encompassing larger spans of time and more public or private organizations.

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